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ABSTRACT

This article provides some practical information on use of poetry to teach such subject areas as history, literature, philosophy, social studies, minority and foreign studies, and the social sciences. Reference is made to the Watershed Foundation, which has a large collection of poetry on cassette tapes that feature the original authors reading and talking about their own work. Criteria are set forth for choosing poems to work with. Six poems by four poets are discussed, covering the topics of history, geography, race relations, family and heritage, and self-perception. Activities for each poem include independent student activity, teacher-assisted activity, or group activity. The poets whose works are included are Langston Hughes, Owen Dodson, Etheridge Knight, and Lucille Clifton. (YLB)

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Using Poetry to Teach Humanities in the Adult Literacy Classroom

Many teachers and tutors are uncertain about or untrained in the use of subject areas which are found under the heading of humanities. What are the humanities? The District of Columbia Community Humanities Council defines them as "those branches of learning which deal with what is fundamentally and essentially human, the attributes which distinguish human beings from all other natural beings: self-consciousness, language, reason, creativity, human values and aspirations, and the products of all of these." Specific academic disciplines include history, literature, philosophy, foreign languages, comparative religion, archaelogy, philosophy of law, arts appreciation, social studies, minority studies and foreign studies, and the social sciences. Study of the humanities promotes the development of many skills: critical thinking, judgment and reasoning, communication and expression of beliefs, self-understanding and understanding of one's place in the world, valuation, integrative understanding, cross-cultural awareness, aesthetic sensibility, and civic responsibility.

Sound more exciting than phonics but less accessible? Right and wrong. The life experiences most adult learners bring to the classroom are vast, colorful, emotional and full of culture. Their verbal and listening skills are much more sophisticated than their reading and writing abilities would suggest. Scholars, poets and historians are studying and writing about things which exist in the students' own lives. When students realize they are the stuff which folklore and culture depend upon and celebrate, then they can view their reading difficulties as impediments rather than as signs of intellectual inferiority.

The Watershed Foundation (1-800-366-9105 or202-722-9106) has a large collection of poets on cassette tape including all the tapes referred to in this article. These tapes feature the original authors reading and talking about their own work. Although it is possible to use only written copies of poems, the tapes enhance learning in several ways by

- making the poems accessible to the lowest level reader
- assisting new readers practicing on their own
- demonstrating that poetry should be read aloud to be fully appreciated
- inspiring readers to practice their own recitation skills.

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For our purposes and for general interest the authors' conversations between poems are as important as the poems themselves. Authors discuss their past, the motivations behind the writing, events of their time. This is historical material and a wonderful glimpse at how the writing process works with great writers.

Tapes have liner notes indicating what books poems can be found in, and with few exceptions, these are easily found at your library. If you have access to a computer, transcribe poems for students using a large (14 pt.) clean typeface, double-spaced. Activities presented in this article have no formal difficulty levels - some a student will be able to do by him/herself; some will require teacher assistance; and some work best as a group activity.

The critieria for choosing poems to work with are:

- Selections are "down to earth"
- use everyday language
- may be serious or whimsical but somehow touch a universal chord
- do not rhyme but have rhythm
- are not flowery, obtuse or whiny.

This particular group of 6 poems by 4 poets covers topics of history, geography, race relations, family and heritage, and self-perception.

Langston Hughes is perhaps the best known black poet of the 20th Century, for good reason - his poems touch us through their simplicity, modesty and open emotions. Hughes' work alone supplies many, many humanities lessons on American life, Afro-American culture, geography, history, and civics. The story of his own life is fascinating. He lived in Harlem during its heyday, was "discovered" while a busboy, and took off to see the world on a merchant ship. He talks about many of these things on the tape, *Langston Hughes*.

KKK

They took me out
To some lonesome place.
They said, "Do you believe
In the great white race?"

I said, "Mister,
To tell you the truth,
I'd believe in anything
If you'd just turn me loose."

**The white man said, "Boy,
Can it be
You're a-standin' there
A-sassin' me?**

**They hit me in the head
And knocked me down.
And then they kicked me
On the ground.**

**A klansman said, "Nigger,
Look me in the face--
And tell me you believe in
The great white race."**

This poem, a snapshot of a time and a situation, can introduce or enhance a lesson on post-Civil War life for Blacks in America. The Klan dates as far back as 1866 when a Southern General from the Civil War, Nathan Bedford Forrest, became the first Grand Wizard. The Klan was established to maintain white supremacy. It was reorganized in 1915 after Blacks had fought in World War I and were returning home with more rights and more demands for equality. The Klan became very notorious during the Civil Rights movement. Many Klan activities are protected by law, such as freedom of speech and the right to asssemble. Although students may oppose these rights, have them write down why the law protects groups like the Klan. With two or more students this can take the form of a debate. One student defends the Klan's rights and another student opposes them. Also research where the Klan is today, how much clout it has, organized groups which counteract the Klan's activities, and who the young members of the Klan are. A personal and individual activity is to have students put themselves in the place of the voice in the poem. How brave would they be in that situation?

One-Way Ticket

**I pick up my life
And take it with me
And I put it down in
Chicago, Detroit,
Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is
North and East -
And not Dixie.**

I pick up my life

And take it on the train
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield,
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake,
Any place that is
North and West -
And not South.

I am fed up
With Jim Crow laws,
People who are cruel
And afraid,
Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me
And me of them.

I pick up my life
And take it away
On a one-way ticket -
Gone up North,
Gone out West,
Gone!

On an emotional level *One-Way Ticket* illustrates disenchantment with the South. Historically it introduces Jim Crow laws. It also provides several geography activities such as finding the places named on a map, reading a train or bus schedule or mapping a route from one town to another. Jim Crow laws should be explained to the students. They were sanctioned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896 (until 1954) and under the doctrine of "separate but equal" kept Blacks from using the same schools, restaurants, bathrooms, cemetaries, etc. as Whites. The term "Jim Crow" comes from an old minstrel song and dance routine performed by White entertainers which was insulting to Blacks. Discuss whether laws exist today which discriminate against certain groups of people. And talk about the South, or "Dixie" - its history, what it is like today, the weather, the people - the beautiful side and the ugly side of Dixie. If appropriate introduce students to some of the great Southern writers. Encourage students to share verbal or written stories about the places they grew up in and talk about whether or not they would want to return.

Suicide's Note

The calm cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss.

In two simple lines using gentle common words Hughes creates an image

that has an immediate impact on the reader. The lowest level reader can memorize and recite this poem.

Owen Dodson is not a famous poet but he is deeply respected in the worlds of literature and theatre. His dramatic reading voice on the tape *Jazz in Praise of the Lord* respects poetry as an oral tradition and stirs the listener. Some of Dodson's poems are difficult or appeal to a narrower audience than Hughes', but his work is very spiritual and worth a listen or a read.

The poem *Black Mother Praying* is deeply troubling (it is also long and might take several lessons to cover) as was the Vietnam War itself. It is a difficult and confusing time to teach about. But it is our country's most recent war and has much to say about the American government, people, and the different faces of patriotism. The country of Vietnam is very foreign to us, the names of places and people are strange, and to the layperson the purposes, strategies and policies of the war are unclear. While many high-school classrooms are now tackling the subject of Vietnam, it is a rare adult basic ed classroom which tries. It is perhaps wisest to focus on the many feelings of the people who went and fought. *Black Mother Praying* immediately sets a mood and makes a statement about what happened to the black soldier who went to fight for a country which treated him like a second class citizen while asking him to kill other men of color without question. In the following excerpt, the mother knows that when her son comes home, he will be thrown back onto the street corner.

How can I present they land to them?
How, when they been battlin in far places for freedom?
Better let em die in the desert drinkin sand
Or holding onto water and slippin into death
Than they come back and see they sufferin for vain.

There are several good oral histories of the Vietnam War. One of them is *Bloods* by Terry Wallace.

Etheridge Knight is a former prisoner and reformed drug addict. He has a spiritual view toward love and sexuality and a strong sense of family which seems intensified by the time he spent separated from his own. The following excerpt from *Ancestry* (on the tape *So My Soul Can Sing)* is about heritage. It lends itself easily to activities like making family trees, collecting photos and family papers, interviewing an older family member, and other forms of personal research. On another level it leads to discussion of heritage and roots, family traits, genes etc.

Ancestry

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st & 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

I have at one time or another been in love with my mother, 1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum), and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7-yr-old niece (she sends me letters written in large block print, and her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews, and 1 uncle. The uncle disappeared when he was 15, just took off and caught a freight (they say). He's discussed each year when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in the clan, he is an empty space. My father's mother, who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birth dates (and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown."

Lucille Clifton is a poet with humour and verve. Her thoughts and feelings transcend race and gender. She writes about human frailty and strength. Many of her poems appeal to children, too. *Homage to My Hips* from the tape *The Place for Keeping* is funny and strong. It makes people smile and feel less nervous about writing about themselves.

Homage to My Hips

these hips are big hips.
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places, these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go
they do what they want to do.
these hips are mighty hips.
these hips are magic hips.

i have known them
to put a spell on a man and spin him like a top!

Ask students why capital letters don't have to be used at the beginning of poetry lines. Discuss what an homage is. Have students write an homage to themselves, or to another person. One adult learner's response was "Homage to My Sneakers."